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Afghanistan: Iran's Role in the Crisis

An Intelligence Memorandum

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**Afghanistan: Iran's Role
in the Crisis****Summary**

Iran has become increasingly involved in the Afghanistan crisis in the last few months. Tehran has provided important diplomatic support to the insurgents fighting the Soviets. The central government has apparently not lived up to its promises to provide material aid, but Tehran continues to assert its willingness to do so if the Soviets do not withdraw from Afghanistan. The Afghan insurgents have received material aid, however, from the Iranian clergy, elements of the Revolutionary Guard, and local officials—aid that reflects the general consensus in Iran in support of the rebel cause.

The Afghans have established a significant presence in Iran. The insurgents train fighters in camps along the border that house more than 100,000 refugees and have offices in Tehran, Qom, and Mashhad.

Some Revolutionary Guard units apparently are providing support for cross-border operations.

Iranian involvement with the insurgents seems certain to increase. Domestic pressures will incline the government toward more active support of the rebels. For their part, the insurgents will probably continue to find Iran an attractive base of operations, especially given the small number of Soviet forces located in the border area.

Since early June the Soviets have become increasingly alarmed by Iran's role in Afghanistan. They have taken a tougher line toward Iranians who have taken outspoken public positions favoring the insurgents. Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh has, for example, been characterized as an agent of the United States and China, and local authorities in Mashhad have been accused of cooperating with the CIA. But Moscow has avoided direct criticism of the Khomeini government.

The tougher Soviet posture is not likely to dissuade Tehran, and the Soviets may be forced to step up their pressure. They could do so—but only at the cost of a significant deterioration in ties with Tehran.

The author of this memorandum is [redacted] Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for Near East/South Asia. Research for this memorandum was completed on 27 June 1980. Comments and queries are welcome and should be directed to the Chief, Southeast Asia Analytic Center, Near East-South Asia Division, OPA, telephone [redacted]

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*Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh
at the Islamic Conference
in May.*

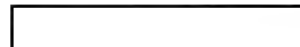


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Afghanistan: Iran's Role in the Crisis

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Negotiating Posture

Iran has become the most vocal Third World supporter of the Afghan insurgency. Iranian leaders—especially Foreign Minister Sadegh Ghotbzadeh—have repeatedly taken a tough approach to President Babrak Karmal's government. Ghotbzadeh played a major role at the recent Islamic Conference in obtaining support for the Afghan insurgents' demands for a total Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. He also has played a key role in the three-man commission on Afghanistan set up by the conference.

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Ghotbzadeh has outlined Iran's position on Afghanistan in simple terms:

- All Soviet troops must leave Afghanistan.
- The insurgents should be brought into a new government.
- The Babrak regime cannot be recognized as Kabul's legitimate government, but it can participate in negotiations on the country's future as an "interested party."

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Tehran has rejected offers from Kabul to improve relations. Babrak reversed his predecessors' tough anti-Khomeini line and has suggested that "the most reverend leader, Imam Khomeini," join him in improving ties between the two countries. Tehran, however, summarily rejected Kabul's 14 May peace proposal addressed to Iran and Pakistan, and Ghotbzadeh labeled the 23 June Soviet troop withdrawal a "maneuver" aimed at influencing Western and Islamic opinion.

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National Consensus

Ghotbzadeh's hard line reflects a consensus in Iran in favor of the insurgents, as well as the Islamic revolution's anti-Communist and anti-Soviet ideology. President Bani-Sadr and Ayatollah Khomeini have made strong public statements attacking the Soviets as have most Iranian clerical leaders. Only the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party has defended the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Other leftist groups like the Mujahedin have criticized the Soviets or taken a low posture.

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The Iranian consensus on Afghanistan indicates that Tehran's concern about the situation on its eastern frontier will be lasting. Even if Ghotbzadeh were to leave office, other Iranian leaders would probably continue to back the insurgents as a means of keeping the Soviets off balance and demonstrating Iran's independence.

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Khomeini has longstanding ties with at least one Afghan rebel leader. Assef Mohsini, who was a student of Khomeini's during the Ayatollah's years in exile in Iraq, currently heads an Afghan group in Qom. Khomeini's ties are strongest with the Shia Muslim Hazara minority in central Afghanistan, a group that has been particularly active in the insurgency against the Babrak regime. Shias comprise only about 12 percent of the Afghan population and have long been discriminated against by the majority Sunnis. Many Hazaras like Mohsini look to Khomeini for leadership. [redacted]

Iranian leaders appear to have little fear of the Soviet reaction to their tough line on Afghanistan. Although Tehran is concerned that Afghanistan may be used by the Soviets as a base for subverting Iran's dissident Baluchi minority, the Iranians are confident they can resist any overt Soviet move into the country through the same kind of massive civil disobedience that brought down the Shah. [redacted]

[redacted]

Tehran, however, has tried to keep its relations with Moscow on other issues from deteriorating. The Iranians value Soviet economic assistance or at least its propaganda value in circumventing US and West European sanctions. Moreover, Tehran is determined to keep some balance in its relations with the superpowers. [redacted]

Aid to the Insurgency

Since January Bani-Sadr and Ghotbzadeh have promised on several occasions to provide the insurgents with material support including money, arms, and volunteers. [redacted] the insurgents have yet to receive aid from the Iranian central government. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] some aid is going to the insurgents from other Iranian sources. [redacted]

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[redacted] Given
the confusion in the Tehran government, it is not surprising that individual Iranian clerical leaders, businessmen, local officials, and elements of the Revolutionary Guards have provided assistance to the insurgents without the explicit approval and perhaps even without the knowledge of the central government. [redacted]

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The insurgents, moreover, have established a significant presence inside Iran. Estimates of the number of Afghan refugees in Iran range from 100,000 to 300,000. [redacted]

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[redacted] suggest that Iranian volunteers are already working with the insurgents inside Afghanistan. [redacted]

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Tehran provides the insurgents with propaganda support and allows them to have offices in Tehran. Moreover, Ghotbzadeh has taken the lead in bringing insurgent leaders to diplomatic conclaves such as the Islamabad conference. [redacted]

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X1 []**Potential Iranian Aid**

Iranian involvement with the insurgents seems certain to increase, partly because it will come under increasing domestic pressure to take a more active part in aiding the insurgents. Ghotbzadeh and other Iranian officials have already said that if negotiations fail to persuade the Soviets to withdraw from Afghanistan, the government will support the insurgents with arms and financial backing. Even if it wanted to, the Tehran regime lacks the ability to curb activity along the border. []

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The insurgents are likely to look to Iran as an increasingly attractive base of operations. The Iranian-Afghan border area has both disadvantages and advantages as a base for insurgent activity:

- The terrain is less suited to guerrilla operations than the mountainous Pakistani-Afghan border region. In the Zabol area the ground is marshy and subject to seasonal flooding from the Helmand River. North of Zabol to the Soviet border the terrain is very barren and primarily desert. Although it is mountainous, there is very little vegetation and guerrilla activity could be easily countered from the air.
- The area is thinly populated. Aside from some agricultural activity along the Helmand, most residents are nomads. The largest city in the area is Mashhad (780,000)—most are much smaller (in Iran, Tayyebat has less than 15,000 residents, Zabol perhaps 30,000; in Afghanistan, Herat has around 75,000, Zaranj less than 10,000).
- There are few Soviet troops in the area. Only one understrength Soviet motorized rifle division is in the Shindand-Herat region, although another is at Kushka just north of the Soviet-Afghan frontier.

The 400-mile long frontier is impossible to close without a major increase in Soviet forces. Even before the insurgency and the decline in Iranian border security, smuggling was widespread. []

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Soviet Reaction

Until mid-June the Soviets generally refrained from commenting on Iran's support for the insurgents. To improve their ties with the Khomeini regime, Moscow chose to ignore Tehran's stand on the Afghan issue on most occasions. Ghotbzadeh's highly visible role in the Islamic Conference in Islamabad in May and with the conference's Afghan committee apparently led to some reevaluation in Moscow that has been reflected in several press commentaries. The Soviets were probably particularly disturbed by a meeting between Ghotbzadeh and Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua in Oslo, Norway, on 12 June during which the Afghan issue was almost certainly discussed. []

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On 16 June a TASS dispatch filed from Kabul claimed that Ghotbzadeh had discussed aiding "counterrevolutionary forces" with Hua during the visit to Norway. TASS suggested that Ghotbzadeh was acting as an agent of the United States and China—a line consistent with Soviet policies aimed at courting Khomeini and the Islamic clergy while suggesting that secular Iranian leaders are insufficiently revolutionary. [REDACTED]

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Several subsequent articles have accused Ghotbzadeh of "echoing American propaganda" and of cooperating with other "circles in Iran" who want to emulate Pakistan's example by setting up bases on Iranian territory for the insurgents. [REDACTED]

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A 25 June *Pravda* commentary by A. Petrov—a pseudonym used to convey authoritative endorsement by the Soviet leadership—accused "local authorities" in Mashhad of conniving with CIA agents in setting up a "center of armed struggle" against the Karmal regime similar to the "rebel training bases" in Pakistan. The article carefully avoided blaming the Khomeini government for complicity in the "Mashhad center." [REDACTED]

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The increase in Soviet public concern about Iran's role in Afghanistan probably reflects the unease in Moscow over the potential for increased Iranian aid to the insurgency as well as the embarrassment caused by Ghotbzadeh's polemics. [REDACTED]

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Moscow faces a fundamental dilemma in developing its policy toward Iran's role in Afghanistan—it must try to balance its desire to maintain fairly good relations with Khomeini while preserving its equities in Afghanistan. The Soviets are clearly trying to avoid an open split with the clerical wing of the Islamic revolution by focusing their attacks on Ghotbzadeh. [REDACTED]

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This tactic is not likely to succeed, given the backing Ghotbzadeh enjoys on the issue. The Soviets will probably adhere to this line as long as possible, however, especially if the central government's direct involvement with the insurgents remains unclear. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets may choose to ignore an escalation in Iranian involvement with the insurgents for some time. Nonetheless, Moscow has several options in dealing with increased Iranian involvement. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets could choose to increase their forces in Afghanistan's western region to prevent cross-border activity, but this is unlikely in the near term. Unless the Soviets increase their troop strength significantly in Afghanistan, they would have to transfer forces from other regions where the insurgency has been more active. [REDACTED]

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Moscow might try to signal its unease by adopting a more aggressive policy toward Iran. The Soviets could exert pressure on Iran more directly by using their economic relationship or increasing their aid to leftist groups in Iran such as the Tudeh. Moscow could also take a more direct role in supporting Iran's dissident minority groups like the Kurds and the Baluchis. These options probably would seriously strain relations with Tehran. []

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X1 The most dangerous Soviet option would be an aggressive policy of pursuing insurgents across the border and disrupting their activity in the refugee camps. The Iranians have charged that Afghan Air Force helicopters entered Iranian territory on at least two occasions (23 February and 20 May), apparently in pursuit of insurgents. A Soviet decision to move aggressively against rebel activity in Iran would risk a fundamental deterioration in Iranian-Soviet relations and would probably be chosen only as a last resort. []

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